



# TASK FORCE REMAGEN:

## Sustaining a Heavy Task Force via Aerial Resupply

by Major Mark A. Olinger

At the beginning of 1969, some of our nation's hardest fighting units were assigned to the XXIV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell. Major ground combat units assigned to this corps were: 3d Marine Division, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized).

With this size of ground force, Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) felt confident that XXIV Corps could defend the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) while simultaneously executing major operations into North Vietnamese Army (NVA) base camps located along the remote western areas of the country. Major operations against NVA base camps, once safe havens for the enemy, were part of MACV's strategy of destroying the NVA logistical system.

No longer would U.S. and allied forces be content to sit back and allow NVA forces to make the first move.

In early January, the NVA reopened Route 922 from Laos into the A Shau Valley, and anti-aircraft guns were installed both in Laos and in the valley. As traffic expanded to 1,000 trucks per day, allied aircraft ran into intense fire from the NVA guns that took a heavy toll. MACV intelligence indicated that NVA forces probably would be moved into the Da Krong River area, and possibly into the mountains west of Hue and southwest of Quang Tri. Once in these positions, the NVA would be postured to launch surprise attacks against populated areas as far south as Da Nang. In late January, XXIV Corps began conducting a series of regimental-size operations near the rugged Laotian border. These operations had the task and purpose to deny NVA units' access into the populous coastal lowlands by destroying his forces and interdicting access to main supply routes from Laos. The 4th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division, operated in the Khe Sanh region during Operation

Scotland II. While the 9th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division, initiated Operation Dewey Canyon against Route 922. Route 922 entered South Vietnam from Laos and became Route 548 that curved through the Da Krong River area and entered into the A Shau Valley. It was the NVA's most important main supply route in I Corps.

During the initial phase of the operation, starting on 19 January, the 9th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division, established fire bases to support later maneuver operations. The second phase involved patrolling around the fire bases to eliminate NVA pockets of resistance. On 11 February, the third phase began with a three-battalion, regimental offensive pushing towards the Laotian border with supporting aircraft and artillery. This offensive lasted for seven weeks, covering more than 30 miles of enemy territory. By the end of the month, the 9th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division, had

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nearly run out of terrain. They had swept south to the Laotian border, eliminating a majority of the enemy resistance. When Operation Dewey Canyon was officially terminated on 18 March, the 9th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division, had captured over 525 tons of weapons and ammunition, including 12 large 122mm cannons. These 122mm cannons were the first ever seen inside of South Vietnam. The 9th Marines, 3d Marine Division could justifiably claim a major setback had been meted out to the North Vietnamese.

Prior to the ending of Operation Dewey Canyon, XXIV Corps directed the very innovative employment of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The brigade was task-organized with the following major units: Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized); 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized); 5th Battalion, 4th Field Artillery (155mm, Self-Propelled); and the 75th Support Battalion. The brigade's commander was directed to send a mechanized heavy task force to conduct a reconnaissance of Route 9 to the Laotian border. This reconnaissance would also protect the northern flank of U.S. and allied forces in the Da Krong River area and the A Chau Valley. Colonel James M. Gibson, Commander, 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), formed Task Force Remagen around the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor. Task Force Remagen was named in honor of the 7 March 1945 crossing of the Remagen Bridge over the Rhine River by the 9th Armored Division, which spearheaded the breakthrough into Germany during World War II.

Task Force Remagen was composed of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; two mechanized infantry companies; a tank company; a self-propelled 155mm artillery battery; armored engineers; and self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. Later the 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized), replaced the 1-77 Armor as the controlling headquarters. On 16 March, the 1,500 soldiers of Task Force Remagen departed Ca Lu down the dirt roadway toward the Khe Sanh Plateau.

Leading the task force was an engineer-reinforced scout platoon that slowly cleared its way through the antitank mines on the upward winding road. This mechanized force built bypasses around wash-outs, maneuvered through the narrow defiles, and crossed streams with their armored vehicle launched bridges (AVLB). Since there were no available forces to secure the defiles and stream crossings, the AVLBs continued with Task Force Remagen after crossing. Lifting of the bridges prohibited the advancing task force from using ground lines of communication for resupply, causing it to be completely sustained by an air lines of communication. Sustaining a mechanized task force entirely by aerial resupply for an extended time period hadn't been accomplished during the Vietnam War. Under normal conditions, logisticians would have been kept busy delivering ammunition, general supplies, and repair parts to the task force, along with providing the required maintenance support.

On 19 March, Task Force Remagen reached the abandoned Khe Sanh Plateau. Allied forces at Khe Sanh had been withdrawn the previous summer to Ca Lu. They encamped for the night, and the next morning M113 armored personnel carriers and M48A3 tanks maneuvered west through the abandoned Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. Task Force Remagen reached the South Vietnamese/Laotian border and established positions.

Looking across the Laotian border at the sinister Co Roc, a granite ridge running along the Laotian side of the border and overlooking the Khe Sanh Plateau. The task force would prowl through the region until the end of April, encountering light resistance. However, the task force was continually harassed by accurate mortar fire from the Co Roc ridge. Unlike Operation Dewey Canyon, where General Creighton Abrams granted authority for limited Marine attacks across the border, this permission was never given to the Task Force Remagen commanders. For 47 days, this task force operated in rugged terrain along the Laotian border demonstrating that even remote base areas were vulnerable to attack by a mechanized force. Operating in country long thought to be impenetrable to armored vehicles, this combined arms

team again demonstrated the advantage of mounted forces in a jungle environment. Concurrent with Task Force Remagen, the remainder of the brigade was supporting Operation Montana Mauler in late March, west of Con Thien along the DMZ under 3d Marine Division operational control. Task Force Remagen would return to its base camp at Ca Lu ending operations along the South Vietnamese/Laotian border on 29 April.

Significant to operations in South Vietnam was the use of helicopters in the logistic support role. Their use freed Army commanders from a complete dependence on ground transportation. The helicopter became an indispensable link in the forward area of operations because of its ability to operate in virtually any weather condition, day or night, with little or no preparation of landing zones. Before Task Force Remagen would terminate operations on the Laotian border, they would be delivered such diverse types of cargo as hot food, medical supplies, ammunition, consumable supplies, and repair parts.

For 47 days, Task Force Remagen operated at distances between 40 to 60 kilometers from its base camp and relied entirely on aerial resupply. U.S. Army and U.S. Marine cargo helicopters airlifted all material and supplies to Task Force Remagen. Requests for supplies and repair parts were forwarded from Task Force Remagen to the Forward Support Element, which in turn forwarded the requests to the 75th Support Battalion Logistics Operations Center at Quang Tri. The requested supplies and repair parts were assembled overnight and either flown or sent by convoy to the Forward Support Element for further delivery to the task force by helicopter. A unit trains concept was used to support the task force forward, consisting of tracked maintenance personnel, supply soldiers, and wheeled vehicles. All supplies and repair parts were flown to the task force in their field locations; repair parts were exchanged for the defective parts, and installed on the spot. Defective parts were returned to the Forward Support Element for repair. Major repairs and overhauls were accomplished under arduous field conditions and included replacing 12 engines weighing over 4 tons, 18 sets of tracks, and 7 transmissions. Fresh water was placed in



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containers ranging from 3-gallon collapsible drums to empty shell casings. Over 59,000 gallons of bulk fuel, 10,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, and 1,000 tons of general supplies were moved by helicopters from the Forward Support Element at Vandergrift Combat Base during the course of the operation.

During this operation, Task Force Remagen received an average of 13 helicopter sorties per day. It was estimated that with an average of 30 minutes per round trip, four helicopters could have met the task force's average daily resupply requirements. The majority of these missions were carried out by UH-1, CH-46, and CH-47 aircraft. The UH-1s operated forward to the platoon level, while the CH-46s and CH-47s transported heavier and more bulky loads to the task force and company trains. Task Force Remagen demonstrated the feasibility and effectiveness of an intensive aerial resupply campaign in support of a heavy task force.

What are the doctrinal lessons learned from Task Force Remagen that are applicable to commanders and staff officers in today's Army and into the 21st Century?

- Heavy forces are effective in a low-intensity conflict environment.
- The combined arms team is a winner and, when properly task-organized, can mass firepower against our enemies where they least expect it.

- Heavy forces can be sustained over an extended period of time by aerial resupply.
- Army Aviation in the logistics support role is a true combat multiplier.
- Use of the Forward Logistics Element or Forward Logistics Base concept is feasible as demonstrated by the 75th Support Battalion.

We must ensure the lessons learned are adopted. This will prevent us from repeating the mistakes of the past.

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